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A Discussion of Grice's Conversational Maxims with Reference to the Pulaar Culture

A DISCUSSION OF GRICE'S CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS

WITH REFERENCE TO PULAAR CULTURE¹

Amadou Hamady Diop

H.P. Grice's paper "Logic and Conversation" (1968) has divided scholars interested in communication for a long time, and the issue of the dispute almost always revolves around the "universality" of Grice's maxims. Keenan, in her paper "The Universality of Conversational Postulates" (1976), questions the universality of some of the maxims with reference to the Malagasy culture. On the other hand, more sympathetic writers like Brown and Levinson (1978) claim that Grice is misunderstood by his critics; they suggest that Grice's maxims:

define for us the basic set of assumptions underlying talk.
But this does not imply that utterances in general, or reasonably frequently, must meet those conditions, as critics of Grice have sometimes thought. (1978: 100).

Brown and Levinson further suggest that, in fact, in most cases people fail to talk "maxim-wise" because of the attention they pay to "face."

Grice considers conversation to be based on a cooperative principle that requires conversationalists to respect four categories: quantity, quality, relation and manner, each of which is composed of a number of maxims. These can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Quantity: Be informative but not too much so.
- 2) Quality: Be truthful. Avoid speculation.
- 3) Relation: Be relevant.
- 4) Manner: Be perspicuous (i.e., avoid obscurity, ambiguity, unnecessary prolixity) and be orderly.

It is not my intention to take sides in the argument. I would like, however, to further discuss the universality of the maxims with respect to my own culture

The main issue I would like to raise about Grice's claims is about both the postulates themselves and the very notion of conversation. The main question for me is "Is it true that the type of conversation described by Grice is the only form of conversation that exists?" If such a question can be answered negatively, one would also expect some differences in the maxims underlying the various conversation types.

It is my claim that in the Pulaar culture, there is a variety of speech events that are referred to as conversations and which are not aimed at giving or receiving information as seems to be the case in the Gricean type of conversation. In Grice's paper (1968: 45) there is a hint that there are "casual conversations", which I believe are opposed to formal conversations. However, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, I am inclined to think that for Grice there is no difference between formal and casual conversations as far as the functioning of the maxims is concerned.

At this point I will give some background information on the Pulaar culture before presenting the different forms of speech events in Pulaar which are often referred to as conversations. I foresee the possibility of opposition to the assertion that the activities I shall later describe are indeed conversations. I have a simple answer for that which will become apparent in the course of the development of my point.

The Pulaar culture is best understood through the Pulaar language, which is made up of a variety of dialects located mostly in the Sahel zone, stretching from Mauretania and Senegal in the extreme west of the African continent to Ethiopia in the extreme east. The Pulaar language, also known as Fula, Fulani, Peul and Fulfulde, was originally the language of the nomadic cattle breeders known as Fula, Fulbe and Peul. Today, although cattlebreeding is still an important activity for these people, many Pulaar speaking groups have settled down in villages and small towns in which the original activity of

cattlebreeding is now coupled with farming and other activities. I belong to one of the latter groups. The group whose culture is referred to here is located in the northern part of Senegal and southern part of Mauretania along the Senegal River Valley in West Africa. This group refers to itself as "Haal-Pulaar-en" (literally "those who speak Pulaar") and refers to its language as Pulaar. In many respects this group is different from other Fula speaking groups in its social structure and culture. It is therefore important to keep in mind that what is reported here concerns only the Haal-Pulaar-en of the Senegal River Valley, not the Pulaar culture as a whole.

Returning to the main issue, we notice that in Pulaar there are at least three terms that refer to one type of conversation or another. They are respectively:

(1) *Yeewtere*, which I suggest should be considered as a generic term, a "hyponym," as well as a specific term, i.e. a "superordinate" (Lyons, 1968: 454-5). In other words *Yeewtere* in Pulaar can be seen as including all the other forms of conversation in a generic sense, and in its specific sense it refers to a form of conversation which we can call a "serious conversation," including exchange of ideas or information, exchange of social politeness and bargaining (e.g., in the case of determining a bride's dowry), etc.

(2) We also have something called *Janondiral* (from the verb *Yanondirde*), which can be crudely translated as "exchanging jokes" or "teasing," to borrow Karl Reisman's terms.

(3) *Pabbondiral* (from the verb *Fabbondirde*) is similar to the *Janondiral* but a little different in its rules and setting (including participants).

Although *Yeewtere* in its specific sense would be the most appropriate type of "conversation" to which we could apply Grice's maxims, one can point to at least three factors that act as constraints on the operation of the conversational maxims in this event. These are: age, sex and nature of relationship.

In the Pulaar culture, children as well as women are constrained not only with respect to how much they can say, but also with respect to how they can say it. A "good

woman" does not speak much nor does she raise her voice when speaking. The only exception to this are members of the *griot* (praise singer) caste. Likewise, children, in their relationship with adults, speak only when given permission to do so, and they cannot raise their voices above adults. Furthermore, children can only talk about very restricted topics. Children who "talk like adults" are rebuked, for it is believed that this can endanger their lives by drawing people's attention; some people's eyes and tongues are believed to be harmful. The inferior status of women and children is also evidenced by the fact that when it comes to deciding about issues concerning the community as a whole, their opinion is rarely sought, and if it is, it never prevails.

Additionally, how much you can say depends on whom you are talking to as much as under what circumstances. For example, in the Pulaar culture, talking to one's in-laws is always a difficult situation, in which both parties become overconscious of "face threatening acts", to borrow Brown and Levinson's (1978) expression. Moreover, in the Pulaar culture, refraining from telling the truth in a situation where the truth can jeopardize people's relationships, is as virtuous/wise as telling the truth under other circumstances. In this respect the Pulaar culture is certainly not an isolated case, at least the French language seems to suggest that the same principles operate in French culture as evidenced by the saying: "*toutes les vérités ne sont pas bonnes à dire*".²

The point of indicating these aspects of the Pulaar culture is to show that because of these various constraints, Grice's "cooperative principle" becomes inoperative. The inequality that underlies the relationships between some members of the society at least partly predetermines the form or content of their verbal exchanges.

What about the other forms of conversation? *Yeewtere*, in its "non-serious" meaning is the type of activity which often occurs when people want to have some fun. Some people are known to be good storytellers; their stories are generally a blend of truth and unfounded fabrication. I must hasten to say that the term storyteller is not the best one to describe what I have in mind. I am using it because I cannot find a better translation. At

any rate, one must make the distinction between this type of storytelling and two other forms of storytelling known as *tinndol* and *daarol*. These are used for educational and entertainment purposes. *Tinndol* always depicts the struggle between good and bad morality and immorality, justice and injustice, intelligence and stupidity, etc. The main protagonists are generally animals (with hyena always representing the bad side and rabbit the good one). The characters can also be human beings. This type of story is told to children generally by grandparents or older females. *Daarol*, on the other hand, is generally for young men. It focuses on qualities of manliness and courage. Its main characters are epic individuals who symbolize the image of a true Fula male. They are proud, courageous, tenacious, generous and cruel. They despise weakness and cowardice. They go for whatever they want despite the risks and dangers. The telling of a *daarol* is always accompanied by the music of a stringed instrument. Each of the epic heroes has his own tune. The telling in this case is generally done by a professional, who earns his living as a musician and storyteller. Sometimes, however, the musician and the storyteller can be two different persons. During the telling of the *daarol*, members of the audience compete in generosity, making gifts to the storyteller, who in turn praises them publicly and compares their deeds to those of the heroes in his stories.

In both events the storyteller monopolizes the floor, and the audience remains attentive and silent. In *daarol* the only signs of participation come from finger snapping and nodding, a way for the audience to indicate its admiration and satisfaction. These stories have a fixed structure with an opening, a development that leads to a climax and a conclusion representing the victory or death of the hero, the last comprising what Labov (1972) calls an "evaluation" of the story. *Daarol* are also different from *tinndol* in that the content of their stories remains relatively constant, the only variable being the personal style of the storytellers.

As indicated earlier, the storyteller I have in mind here is different from the ones I have just described in *tinndol* and *daarol*. S/he can be anyone recognized as being funny

S/he is not necessarily a professional either. For such an event to take place, there must be at least two people, the listener and the speaker, but sometimes it requires a larger audience.

The speaker here never has a central theme in his/her stories. S/he generally responds to his/her audience's demands, and the more people laugh about the stories, the more the storyteller is encouraged to invent. The stories can be about a member or members of the audience, or they can be about somebody who is absent from the scene. The following is an example of how this speech event operates. Suppose people are gathering for any given happy social event and the "funny" person approaches the group. B is our funny person and A represents an individual in the audience.

- A B come and tell us about what happened to so and so when he was
cornered by a lion
B That was a dreadful encounter, indeed....

This is generally how it starts. B may be eager to tell the story, but s/he may feign some reluctance by alleging, for instance, that the persons in question are his/her good friends and s/he would not like to embarrass him/her. The audience, in this case, would encourage him/her to tell the story. A more or less protracted moment of negotiation may ensue until B gives in or until s/he convinces the audience that s/he should not tell the story. I must clarify that reluctance to tell the story may be a maneuver to elicit more encouragement, or it may be genuine, in which case the "victim(s)" of the stories may have bought his/her silence in one way or another, i.e., by making a gift to him/her or by befriending him/her.

If the story is told, it is likely that many new things will appear in it for the entertainment of the audience. This is generally a well-known story, repeated again and again so that one way of keeping up its interest is to add something new every time it is retold. In this event, although the storyteller holds the floor most of the time, s/he is often challenged, but this aims at heightening the "tension" of the whole event rather than

destroying its climax. The challenge may come from a person in the audience reminding the storyteller that the last time s/he told the story s/he said something different, or it can be about some apparent contradictions in the story. People can stay hours listening to one or many persons telling such stories, jumping from one topic to another. It is to be noted that the aim of the speaker is not really to communicate any information; in fact, as mentioned above, the stories being told are generally known to all or most of the people. Nobody is concerned whether what is being said is true or not; they just want the story to be funny. If the speaker can manage to remain funny, s/he can keep the floor as long as s/he wishes. This is mainly an adult activity, and it may occur at any time of day. As stated earlier, this type of *Yeewtere* is not very different from the other two events, *Janondiral* and *Pabbondiral*, particularly in its structure. In fact it is often a mixture of both.

Janondiral is the type of exchange often witnessed between cousins. In the Pulaar culture there are three types of cousins: (1) blood cousins (which in my culture refers to mother's brother's children or father's sister's children); (2) patronym-cousins, for example, in Senegal the following patronym groups have a cousin-like relationship: Joop-Njie-Sy, Soh-Ly-Caam, Bah-Jallo etc.; (3) ethnic-cousins, for example, in Senegal the Haal-Pulaar-en (my ethnic group) and the Sereer, the Sereer and the Joola, etc. Inside these networks of relationships both *Janondiral* and *Pabbondiral* are common and permitted. *Janondiral* is generally milder than *Pabbondiral*, which can be at times very "rude" by normal social standards. This is why the "rudest" aspects obtain only under the conditions described below. An example of *Janondiral* would be something like the following: A and B are cousins by virtue of any of the relationships listed above. A is passing by B's farm; B is working on the farm:

A: What do I see on this farm, only *ñebe* (white beans)? (Maybe only part of the crops really are *nebe* or there may not be any *nebe*.)

B: Are you blind? Where can you see *ñebe*? *Ñebe* is not for me, it's for people like you.

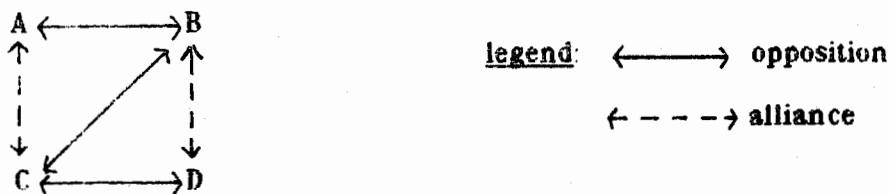
This type of exchange can go on as long as the situation allows, and the whole point here is related to the cultural meaning attached to white beans. In spite of the fact that they are a common ingredient in people's meals, nobody would admit to being fond of them. It is believed that eating beans causes a lot of flatulence which is shameful and something never done in public. The epithet of "beans eater" suggests the results that come from it, therefore, nobody wants to be associated with even growing beans, let alone eating them. This activity, like the one described before it, supposes the presence of at least two people or more.

Pabbondiral, on the other hand, can be much harsher. It can range from mention of physical defects to "ritual insults." However, because this is seen within the boundaries of the particular relationship that exists between the participants, no offense is taken as long as everyone plays fair, i.e., respects the rules of the game. I must add that such types of exchanges often operate spontaneously and can occur between two total strangers, especially in the cases of patronym and ethnic cousins. The following anecdote best describes such a spontaneous exchange: One day in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal, I waved to one of the urban buses, and it stopped a few yards away. Rather than hastening to board the bus, I took my time walking towards it. As I was walking, I heard the driver's mate shout at me, "Come on, hurry up, you bastard!". "Bastard" used to be and still is, for some people at least, the worst insult in my culture. I was so angry that I hurried up to reach the bus in order to give the impudent young man a good lesson. But as I reached the bus, my eyes red with fury, the mate added "damn Toucouleurs!" When I heard these words I smiled and said: "I knew you were a bastard Sereer".

What happened in this incident was that somehow the young man had identified me as a Toucouleur (another name used in Senegal for my ethnic group). As a Sereer, an ethnic cousin, he can be "rude" to me. He signaled his identity to me by referring to mine. I was not right when I said, "I knew you were a bastard Sereer". I only knew after he had used the term Toucouleur, but it became clear to me at that point that the man was not

being hostile or impolite but simply signaling our membership in a certain network in which such exchanges are tolerable. Note that it is possible for the frame to shift from hostile to non-hostile, i.e., when the cousin-like relationship is noticed *a posteriori*. There were two reasons why the mate's comment was not perceived as hostile. First, it is easy in Senegal to identify somebody's ethnic group judging from external, visible signs (outfit type of jewelry, etc.). Second, being so blatantly rude with customers would quickly put the mate's boss out of business. If he were perceived as being impolite or lacking in courtesy he would have been challenged, not only by the victim but also by everybody inside the bus. Additionally, if the mate had not provided the frame in which his insult could be interpreted as being non-hostile, the consequence would have been a fight. It is to be noted that these insults are also used for fun. Such a type of exchange could have occurred with a patronym cousin but never with a blood cousin. This is what I mean by rules which may differ from encounter to encounter.

Pabbondiral is also very common among peers in the same age group or between members of two consecutive age groups. In these cases, too, the rules regarding what is permissible differ greatly. For instance, among peers "ritual insults" are very common provided there is no outsider in the group. The use of certain verbal attacks against a peer in the presence of an outsider is considered a serious breach of the rules and may lead to the breakdown of the whole exchange. It is interesting to note that Kochman (1981: 56-7) found a similar use of "ritual insults" among Black Americans, with almost the same rules. *Pabbondiral* is, however, most commonly encountered when two members of "adjoining" or consecutive age groups meet. One interesting aspect in the interage-group exchanges is the type of alliances that form. Suppose we have four age groups, A, B, C, and D respectively, from the oldest to the youngest. Whenever these four groups are brought together by any happy social event, attacks start almost immediately between the groups and tacit alliances are formed on the basis of the principle, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". We can represent this in the following way:



The figure shows that the relationships can be at most triangular but never quadrangular. In other words, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend, but my enemy's friend is not necessarily my enemy". This is represented by the 0 (zero) relationship that exists between A and D. They are so far apart in age that it is tacitly considered inappropriate for A and D to indulge in such exchanges with each other, and so it goes from the top age group to the bottom one. Where the exchanges are permitted, age places a great constraint on what you are allowed to say to your opponent. One can invent any kind of untruthful story about an opponent, but one cannot use "rude" terms with an "elder or younger brother"; doing so is breaking the rules and therefore jeopardizing the event.

A common feature to all these events is that they can be aggressive but never hostile. Each participant is supposed to keep in mind the rules of the game and should never attempt to break them. There are two ways a rule can be broken: (1) by using language inappropriate to the setting (e.g., ritual insult used in presence of/against a non-peer becomes impoliteness); (2) losing one's temper when the attacks are fair, i.e., made in accordance with the rules of the particular event. Losing one's temper when an attack is carried out appropriately is a clear sign of defeat or of asocial behavior.

Now let us see how relevant Grice's conversational maxims and his notion of conversational implicature are to the events we have just presented. First of all, I can talk about conversational maxims in this context only if I make sure that what I have described are forms of conversations, as I claim they are. One possible problem I see here is some people's reluctance to accept the speech activities I have described as conversations; they may refer to their cultures to find similar activities with different names and try to

convince me that what I have described cannot be called or considered conversation. My answer to such a possible objection is that the culture I am concerned with refers to all these activities as conversation (*Yeewtere* in its generic meaning). To prove this I propose setting up a test which consists of approaching a person near the scene of these events and asking the question: "What is all this noise about?" The answer is likely to be one of the following:

- (1) *Be ngoni tan ko e Yeewtude.*
They are only talking (i.e., conversing; generic meaning).
- (2) *Be ngoni tan ko e Yanondirde.*
They are only + (reference to the specific activity).
- (3) *Be ngoni tan ko e Fabbondirde.*
They are only + (reference to the specific activity).

In other words, to answer the question a Pulaar speaker would use the generic term *Yeewtere* to suggest that the exchanges are not hostile, they are just conversations, or s/he may refer to the specific name of the event.

Another way of looking at it is by referring to what a Haal Pulaar means when s/he says *Ar njeewten!* ("come and talk with me", or "let's have a conversation!"). This invitation can mean a range of things, from "inform me about something" to "come and entertain me", in the sense used in the event we described earlier. The correct interpretation of what is meant depends on the specific relationship between the two people, the nature of their shared knowledge or the nature of the encounter. It is to be noted that in any one of these events, if the conditions are right, there can be a shift from one form of conversation to another. The very fact that the term *Yeewtere* is often used to refer to these various activities is not an indication that Pulaar is poor in terms of reference; indeed the specific names also used to refer to each event prove the contrary. What this indicates, in my opinion, is a certain attitude/understanding of what conversation is and what it is not, with conversation best seen as a generic term.

This observation brings me to formulate a definition of the notion of conversation with respect to the Pulaar culture. I propose that a conversation is a non-hostile, more or

less cooperative verbal exchange between at least two participants over a certain period of time. *Yeewtere* is opposed to *duko*, i.e., "argument," which is always perceived as being hostile. This crude definition incorporates all types of non-hostile exchanges. Notice that it is cooperative, in varying degrees. In the speech activities I have described, except in what I call serious conversation, the participants are in constant competition because the aim is to defeat the opponent in the verbal contest. It is very much like the type of argument in an Antiguan village reported on by Karl Reisman (1974). However, there is also a certain level of tacit cooperation among the participants not to break the rules, i.e., to remain within the boundaries of what is permissible. Finally, to those who would still feel reluctant to accept my putting all these activities under the title of conversation, I would like to quote Schegloff from his article "Sequencing in Conversational Openings":

I mean to include chats as well as service contacts, therapy sessions as well as asking and getting the time of day, press conferences as well as exchanged whispers of "sweet nothings". I have used "conversation" with this general reference in mind... (1972: 375)

I hope my argument has by now become convincing enough for me to proceed to discuss briefly Grice's maxims and the concept of conversational implicature with reference to the features of Pulaar culture described above. It seems to me that the maxims of quantity are simply irrelevant, since these conversations are not aimed at imparting information in the first place. The maxims of quality are systematically trampled down; this is done openly, and it is accepted as part of the game. The maxim of relevance holds only with respect to events, not to topic; being irrelevant is using an act of speech that would break the rules of interaction and therefore jeopardize the exchange. The expression "be relevant" would therefore be seen as meaning "be appropriate". As for the last group of maxims, I hardly see some of them as being applicable to Pulaar culture. This is the case with the maxims dealing with "prolixity" and "orderliness". Perspicuity, however, is certainly applicable, but not necessarily in the way Grice conceives of it. Indeed, it could be postulated that for a conversation to be successful, the participants must

understand clearly what each one is saying. This is valid for any culture. At the same time, it is conceivable that cultures may differ in what clarity, or rather, what lack of clarity is. To support this, I can point to two cases where clarity is relative rather than absolute. The first case concerns the Fulani subgroup as opposed to the Toucouleur subgroup (see above). There is a popular belief among the latter group that the former group is "impenetrable." This is a crude translation of "*pullo ina nibbini*", which literally means "the Fulani, (i.e. the people), are opaque/dark" meaning it is hard to understand what they mean. In other words, what the Fulani say does not necessarily coincide with the linguistic face value of the words. This has to do, I suppose, with their general discretion and maybe also with the fact that a "noble person" (which they are) should not speak much. At any rate, what we see here is a characteristic feature of a whole group which has something to do with how they view themselves and others rather than the nature of the interaction itself.

Further, it is a well-known fact that Africans, especially in their late adulthood, have a predilection for proverbs as a way of making a point. The understanding of the meaning of these proverbs requires a deep knowledge of the Fula culture. The use of proverbs is both a mark of wisdom and a feature of eloquence. When an older person uses proverbs with a younger person, his/her aim is not to make a point clearer but rather to show his/her wisdom. This is an attribute of old age. It is not rare for the meaning of such proverbs to be inaccessible to a younger person; yet, that is never perceived as a lack of clarity on the part of the person but rather as an example of his/her wisdom and mastery of the language. In other words, obscurity in this case is positively valued by the interlocutor, who humbly admits his/her shallow mastery of the language. Because conversation in its serious sense is often a battle of the wits between interlocutors, it involves a lot of skill on the part of the speakers to decode each other's cryptic messages. This is seen as part of the game. We can therefore assert that if there are any maxims at all

underlying these speech events, they are no doubt different from the maxims proposed by Grice.

The final issue that remains is the treatment of "conversational implicature" in this type of conversation. I am inclined to believe that in the types of activities that we have labeled competitive, no implicature can obtain, because every time a rule is broken, whether consciously or unconsciously, this tends to be interpreted by the opponent as a "foul". And as I said earlier, when such a thing occurs it is almost certain that the activity is threatened by a conflict. This is so true that at the beginning of the activity almost invariably an expression is used to provide a frame. This is what I referred to earlier as the signal of the particular type of relations that hold between the protagonists. It is an evocation of the special rights and duties each one has towards the other. One clearly indicates how what one says must be taken. In other words, if there are any maxims underlying these events, they are strictly followed rather than "flouted".

The only activity I can think of that can engender implicature in the sense Grice uses it is in what I call the "ritual cursing" that often occurs between grandparents and their grandchildren. Cursing in the Pulaar culture means wishing something bad to happen to somebody. It is a common thing for grandparents to say to their grandchildren

"May God kill you (at this hour)!"
"May you never be successful in life!"

These curses, whether they are uttered in time of anger or not, are never taken seriously by the grandchildren, but rather cause laughter and further teasing of the grandparents. Because the grandparents are expected to want the the best for their grandchildren, and because everybody in the society knows that the grandparents do not really mean what they say, these curses are interpreted as simply ritual, if not a true sign of affection.

In this paper I have tried to show that Grice's notion of conversation may turn out to be very narrow with respect to certain cultures. One important consequence of widening the definition of conversation is that the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims come into question. I have also indicated that even in serious

conversation in Pulaar some members of the society are constrained with respect to what they can say. As can be noticed, this is not to say that Grice is not right within the framework of his own culture. Indeed, I feel that he has put forward a powerful heuristic model that may yield interesting results when carefully applied.

¹ This is a slightly revised version of a paper written for Dean Hymes' "The Ethnography of Speaking" course.

² Rough translation: Not all truths should be told.

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